Sustainable Conservation Practice: Government House and Walsh Street, Melbourne

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Abstract
This paper explores the relationship between heritage conservation and ecological sustainability as guiding principles informing the management of the built environment. In particular, it is interested in how these two objectives might be pursued in a way that is mutually supportive.

These issues are investigated using two specific case studies from Melbourne, Australia: ‘Greening Government House’, a feasibility project carried out jointly by the Office of the Governor of Victoria and the Office of the Victorian Government Architect to investigate ways to make Victoria’s vice regal residence, Government House, more environmentally sustainable; and the establishment of the Robin Boyd Foundation and its role in the conservation of one of Australia’s most important modernist houses, 290 Walsh Street, South Yarra, Robin Boyd’s own house.

Through these case studies the potential benefits of an integrated approach to asset management, sustainability and conservation for significant heritage buildings are highlighted. The paper argues that, by taking a broad approach to sustainability that encompasses cultural, social and economic dimensions, in addition to the usual environmental concerns, mutually supportive and ultimately more effective results can be achieved for heritage conservation, built environment sustainability and cultural enrichment.

Introduction
This paper will explore the potential benefits of an integrated approach to heritage conservation, sustainability and asset management for significant heritage buildings. It argues that, by taking a broad approach to sustainability that encompasses cultural, social, and economic dimensions, in addition to the usual environmental concerns, mutually supportive and ultimately more effective results can be achieved for heritage conservation, built environment sustainability, and cultural enrichment. The paper seeks to broaden the technical emphasis of much heritage conservation literature to analyse the sustainable conservation of culturally important elements of the historic environment in relation to the range of concerns faced by the owners and managers of heritage buildings.

Conserving and managing valuable elements of cultural and built heritage is a complex issue. Only in rare cases is preservation alone an achievable or appropriate response. To preserve their social value, and also to be economically viable, the conservation of heritage buildings more usually requires continued occupation or adaptive re-use (Hansen 2001). In this context, however, higher contemporary expectations of occupant or user comfort, along with more stringent requirements in terms of occupational health and safety, fire safety, accessibility, and security raise a host of issues for the responsible management of heritage buildings. More recently, the imperative to reduce energy and resource consumption in the built environment – as part of the need to transition to more ecologically sustainable forms of urban habitation – has added another layer of complexity to the problem of conserving built heritage (Rowe 2009).

Current heritage policy in Victoria makes a connection between built heritage conservation and the sustainability of the built environment more generally (State of Victoria 2006). The particular nature of this relationship is expressed both in terms of intergenerational equity (preserving the options of future generations) and environmental benefit (recognising the embodied energy represented by historic built fabric and hence the minimisation of energy consumption and building waste achieved by its conservation) (State of Victoria 2006: 21; Rowe 2008). The need to find new, sustainable uses for heritage places and objects is seen therefore as key to a sustainable future. The contribution that heritage makes to social and economic sustainability is alluded to in this context (State of Victoria 2006: 21), and expanded upon by Rowe (2008), following Balderstone (2004). However, the mechanism by which this is to be achieved is not identified beyond conservation per se. The focus of state policy, in other words, is upon the contribution of heritage conservation to broader sustainability goals, rather than how the conservation process itself can be sustainable – for instance, how the social and economic sustainability of a particular heritage place might be achieved, both for itself and in the interests of wider sustainability objectives. This paper seeks to shed further light on this relationship by suggesting that it is in the practice of conservation – of deciding exactly what to conserve and how to conserve it – that sustainable conservation practices emerge.

These issues are explored using two case studies from Melbourne, Australia: Government House, the Official Residence of the Governor of the State of Victoria, and 290 Walsh Street, the former private family home of post-war Modernist Melbourne architect, Robin Boyd. Although very different in terms of age, size, architectural style, cultural meaning, and environmental performance, both buildings have a significant place in the history of the built environment of Melbourne and Victoria and raise important questions about the value of built heritage in relation to other (potentially conflicting) concerns informing the management of the built environment.

In each of the two cases selected for analysis, both heritage conservation and sustainability were approached in a very practical yet holistic way that focused on the nexus between the building’s cultural significance and its use. The buildings are conceived as integral parts of a contemporary built environment in which their enduring use in the service of the cultural legacy they represent not only demonstrates good conservation practice but can contribute to enhancing ecological sustainability. Without wanting to diminish the importance of examining individual buildings as discrete systems, it is the role they do or could play within the wider built environment and in terms of cultural sustainability that is the focus.
Cultural sustainability in relation to built heritage is understood here, following Hawkes (2001), as enabling these tangible manifestations of society’s values and aspirations to make an ongoing contribution to cultural vitality through communicating and interpreting past expressions of culture in a way that fosters contemporary cultural flourishing. ‘Sustainability’ has become an ubiquitous concept in built environment policy and urban planning over the last two decades, having provided a useful framework for integrating conceptually the management of the physical built environment with its social and economic dimensions (Gleeson & Low 2000). The absence of ‘culture’ from understandings of sustainability in public planning discourse was discussed by Hawkes (2001), who argued for its place as the ‘fourth pillar’ of sustainability. While Hawkes (2001: 30) has noted the relevance of built heritage conservation to cultural sustainability, the importance of cultural planning for this paper is that it opens up a way of integrating two often competing conceptualisations of the historic environment (Davison 1991: 3): on the one hand as a cultural resource (Boyer 1994); and as formalised ‘heritage’ or ‘national estate’ on the other. In Australia, the Burra Charter has played a significant role in introducing sustainability concepts to heritage conservation through the idea that securing a building’s future is key to securing its past. But the use of cultural planning as a policy tool, especially by local government (McShane 2008), has enabled new associations between cultural heritage, community vitality and environmental sustainability to emerge.

**Greening Government House**

‘Greening Government House’ was a feasibility project carried out jointly by the Office of the Governor and the Office of the Victorian Government Architect. A desire to assess and, where necessary, intervene to improve the environmental performance of the building became an opportunity to investigate its patterns of use and the particular opportunities for the sustainability upgrade to support heritage outcomes. This was done conscious of the very high level of cultural heritage significance the building has – a significance deriving from the building’s original and ongoing association with the Office of Governor – and its prominent status within Victoria’s historic built environment as an excellent and well-preserved example of a nineteenth century mansion house and gardens. The result was that the feasibility work done to investigate ‘greening’ Government House identified a range of sustainability measures that related as much to the strategic consideration of how the house and gardens operated in the context of the wider precinct as to technical intervention in the building’s material fabric or passive and active systems.

Government House is a prominent and substantial mansion house complex, set in extensive landscaped gardens. Constructed between 1872 and 1876, it was built to serve as the official place of residence of the Governor of the Colony of Victoria and was for many years a centre of Melbourne society. The building’s design and construction was overseen by the Inspector General of Public Works, architect William Wardell, assisted by J. J. Clark and Peter Kerr. Situated on a hilltop site and surrounded by the Royal Botanic Gardens and Kings Domain, the building overlooks the City of Melbourne across the Yarra River. Designed in the conservative classical style, the building features a 44 metre tower which is visible from many locations throughout the city. After Federation, the House became for a time the official residence for the Governor-General of Australia while the new national capital, Canberra, was being planned and built. Since 1934 it has continued to serve its original primary function. In addition to the Governor’s private residence and executive offices, Government House accommodates State Function rooms (Dining Room, Drawing Room and Ballroom), the Office of the Governor, guest accommodation, and service and support areas. There are several ancillary buildings located on the site which support the House and its operations: the Official Secretary’s Residence, Caretaker’s Residence, Chauffeur’s Cottage, and the Stables and Mews.

In 2007, following discussions between the Governor, the Victorian Government Architect and the Secretary of the Department of Premier and Cabinet, the Office of the Victorian Government Architect was asked to examine possibilities for implementing ecologically sustainable design (ESD) measures at Government House. A comprehensive audit of Government House was being undertaken to quantify current water and energy usage and propose a range of ESD options for consideration (Lovell Chen & Arup 2007a). The audit had identified that the majority of water consumption (approximately 94 per cent) was for the preservation and maintenance of the garden. Energy use was found to have a high base load, related to lighting, refrigeration, and space heating and cooling. Energy consumed by lighting was particularly high as this included flood lighting of the tower at night and security lighting.

The results of this investigative work to identify what opportunities there were for introducing new technologies were sometimes counter-intuitive. For instance, thermal performance modelling of the building by the environmental engineers, Arup, demonstrated that double-glazing the windows of the House (many of which face west) would have only a minimal impact on the overall performance of the building. As the cost of such an intervention would be high, it therefore did not represent value for money. This highlighted the need for an approach to sustainability that included understanding existing patterns of use and site management to explore the inherent ability for the house, outbuildings and gardens, as originally conceived and constructed, to respond to current day sustainability objectives.

Works that could be implemented to improve ESD performance and address key operational issues identified in the audit were divided into two broad categories. The first were so-called minor works that could begin immediately and be carried out progressively as part of a general maintenance plan. These works were expected to have a significant impact on the efficiency of water and energy usage, and substantial improvements have been achieved. Energy consumption was
reduced by sixteen per cent between 2007 and 2008 and thirteen per cent from 2008 to 2009, representing a 27 per cent reduction in energy consumption over the two years. Installation of water tanks has reduced mains water use by up to one third of total consumption.

The second category was major works to address water and energy supply. These projects were visionary in concept and premised upon input by and partnership with other government departments and agencies and the City of Melbourne. The proposed projects were:

1. Energy Supply – An on-site solar array, similar to one that had recently been installed at Melbourne’s Queen Victoria Market was proposed, that could produce the electrical energy requirements of the House and grounds and return excess electricity to the grid.

2. Water Supply – Melbourne City Council, who manages the Domain and Shrine of Remembrance, was investigating, in partnership with the Royal Botanic Gardens and Government House, the feasibility of a sewer mining plant to supply water for the whole precinct and capable of meeting all garden water requirements for the house.

3. House Occupancy – A hydronic heating system powered by solar and geothermal energy was recommended to improve occupant comfort and therefore increase use of the house in winter.

The heating project was part of a larger objective to maximise use of the house overall, thereby deriving greater benefit from this valuable asset by enabling an expansion of vice regal uses of Government House for longer periods of the year. With well in excess of 20,000 people visiting the house annually (not including public open days) (Lovell Chen & Arup 2007: 5) usage was already high, but the State Ballroom – a sizeable function venue able to accommodate 1,000 people (or 600 seated) – and the State Dining Room, which can seat up to 54 guests, were used predominantly in spring and autumn, being uncomfortably hot or cold at other times of the year (Lovell Chen & Arup 2007: A3, A5).

In addition to managing thermal comfort, the other key issue affecting the use of these facilities was the standard and capacity of the Government House Kitchen, which was inefficient and out of date. The kitchen is currently being upgraded, along with the State Pantry, to bring it up to contemporary standards and to improve capacity and efficiencies. When complete, this will mean Government House can be used more intensively for State functions, consistent with the Building’s primary role as the Governor’s residence. The kitchen and heating upgrade will also enhance use of the accommodation wing, which has rooms for State visitors and in effect functions as a small hotel.

Concurrent with the development of the Greening Government House proposals, the Victoria Police Mounted Branch were investigating options for their future accommodation. Mounted Branch’s existing accommodation in Grant Street, Southbank, greatly exceeded current needs and therefore was substantially underutilised. The Police were looking to shift their stables to Attwood, outside Melbourne, and it was proposed that the current Victoria Police stables be made available to the Victoria College of the Arts. Given its location, adaptive re-use of this building for arts and education purposes was considered appropriate. It was, however, highly desirable to have a small ‘Staging Post’ close to the centre of the city to provide the

Figure 2. The Government House Mews (Source: Office of the Victorian Government Architect)

Mounted Branch with a venue for settling and exercising horses after transportation. This would involve the stabling of around six horses, and the provision of some office space, facilities, and parking.

The Office of the Victorian Government Architect undertook to investigate the potential to locate this ‘Staging Post’ in the Government House Mews complex, as the Mews and associated buildings, including the original Government House Stables, were not fully occupied and of an appropriate scale. This was anticipated to have conservation benefits by establishing a relevant contemporary use for the Mews.

The idea of reinstating uses similar to the original use of the buildings was investigated on the grounds of potential heritage and sustainability outcomes. There were, however, significant issues in having two independent entities operating from the site due to potential conflict with the primary vice regal use, and the plan did not progress.

Walsh Street and the Robin Boyd Foundation

The conservation of 290 Walsh Street, South Yarra, the former residence of Robin and Patricia Boyd and their family, offers an innovative case study of the integration of heritage conservation and sustainable practice. Now known as ‘Walsh Street’, this house offers a new, twenty-first century paradigm for the museum house, providing a model for how the conservation

Figure 3. Walsh Street – Courtyard, 1963 (Source: Mark Strizic; reprinted courtesy of Mark Strizic and the Robin Boyd Foundation)
of a heritage building can be an integral part of sustaining the cultural legacy with which its significance is linked, and how the promotion of this legacy in turn assists to conserve the building. Designed by Robin Boyd for his own family and built between 1957 and 1959, the house at 290 Walsh Street is a seminal building, both within Robin Boyd’s oeuvre and the history of Modernist architecture in Australia generally. As such it holds a very important place in Melbourne’s cultural landscape.

The house itself is a significant exploration of ideas about home, dwelling, and family life in post-war Australia. Boyd was an early proponent of Australian modernism and the house is defiantly modernist in its pursuit of the structural and spatial possibilities enabled by advances in materials and engineering technology and, typically of Boyd, is staunch in the singularity of its architectural idea. It is, nonetheless, also quintessentially Australian – Melbournian even – and unashamedly suburban. Comprised of two volumes, separated programmatically into parents’ and children’s living quarters and spatially by an intervening courtyard with glazed side walls, the house offers an alternative paradigm for suburban family living.

The cultural significance of ‘Walsh Street’ rests also on the fact that its architect and first owner, Robin Boyd, was one of Melbourne’s most important modernist architects and probably the nation’s greatest commentator on the place of architecture within Australian society (Serle 1996). Boyd was a prolific critic, writer, and a staunch advocate for promoting the benefits of good design to the general public. His work had both a deep impact and broad influence on the architectural profession and general public alike, gaining a place for architecture and design in public discourse, and engaging a far wider audience on these subjects than was usually the case.

It is interesting to note that at the time Robin Boyd was designing this house he was also writing The Australian Ugliness (2010), his most popular and influential book, now regarded as an Australian classic. In this book Boyd presents a critique of the suburban villa, essentially a cellular building sited in the middle of its block of land. In many respects, ‘Walsh Street’ can be read as the antithesis of this type. Not only does its open plan challenge the traditional cellular house design, but it takes the usual suburban outdoor areas of front and rear yard and side driveway and bundles all these to the middle of the block as a courtyard that is more closely linked to the occupation of the house. This becomes a built version of one of the central theses of The Australian Ugliness: that we need to understand the local conditions and analyse our needs, then respond with an architecture suited to the Australian lifestyle and climate.

In addition to writing, teaching and public speaking, Boyd is also widely remembered as the first director of the Royal Victorian Institute of Architects’ ‘Small Homes Service’, a role he very much made his own. The Small Homes Service brought to Australia’s post-war housing shortage and Melbourne’s suburban expansion a range of modern, well-designed houses that would be within the means of a large sector of the population. For five pounds, prospective home buyers selected a set of architectural plans from a continuously updated range of offerings. Affordability and broad appeal was based principally on keeping the homes ‘small’, but also through the clever economy of making each set of working drawings available to up to fifty households, thereby spreading the cost of design and documentation across several end-users of the service. The scheme was significant in bringing modern architectural ideas to a wide audience in Victoria, while providing many households with affordable, well-designed homes. To promote the Small Homes Service and the design ideas behind it, Boyd wrote a regular column in Melbourne’s Age newspaper.

In 2004, a group of enthusiasts within the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) arranged a number of events during that calendar year celebrating and promoting the legacy of Robin Boyd. This was conceived as part of a new strategy for increasing public engagement, in response to declining visitation numbers to buildings owned by the Trust and diminishing support. When the National Trust of Australia (Victoria) was formed in the 1950s and its flagship property, the mid-nineteenth century mansion house ‘Como’ was acquired (National Trust of Australia 1996), this reflected community aspiration at the time to preserve the building fabric of the nineteenth century city – which had come under increasing threat – and had high profile supporters including Robin Boyd himself (ibid.: 10). This aspiration and support arguably sprang from a broader movement to re-engage with the legacy of ‘Marvellous Melbourne’ at a time when the post-war ‘long boom’ not only emulated the optimism and growth of that earlier period of Melbourne’s history (Davison 2004) but threatened its built legacy through new urban development processes that were remaking the city. By the start of the twenty-first century, waning community support for the Trust demanded new approaches be initiated to re-engage the public in conserving culturally significant places. The Boyd celebrations were intended as one means of reconnecting the community with the cultural legacy contained in Victoria’s built environment.

The overwhelming public response to the series of open days, exhibitions, and talks programmed during 2004 prompted and enabled a more ambitious proposal to establish a Robin Boyd Foundation and purchase a significant Boyd house when next the opportunity arose. A shortlist of Boyd’s most important homes, including Boyd’s own home at 290 Walsh Street, was drawn up. This plan to purchase a key example of Boyd’s domestic architecture was intended not only as means

Figure 4. Robin Boyd, 1970 (Source: Mark Strizic; reprinted courtesy of Mark Strizic and the Robin Boyd Foundation)
to conserve at least one of his buildings in a context where other important houses by Boyd had been lost or substantially altered (for instance, the Lloyd House, Brighton (1959) had been demolished in July 2003), but was central to a broader vision to promote an appreciation of the cultural legacy of Boyd and his work, as well as to continue his public role as a community educator promoting the benefits of good design, through the establishment of a Robin Boyd Foundation.

Formal contact was made with the Boyd family at this juncture and the opportunity to purchase ‘Walsh Street’ followed immediately. Initially listed for sale on the open market, the property was eventually purchased through negotiations with Mrs Patricia Davies, who had tenaciously preserved the house and its contents since the time of her husband Robin Boyd’s death in 1971. Serving in this way as ‘the catalyst for the formation of the Robin Boyd Foundation’ (Boyd, P. 2010) in 2005, ‘Walsh Street’ has become the home of the Foundation and its activities since its independent future was secured in 2008.

In deciding on an operating model for the Robin Boyd Foundation, and its custodianship of ‘Walsh Street’, the static museum house approach was deliberately eschewed, being identified as neither financially viable nor in the spirit of Robin Boyd’s legacy. Reflecting the lives, personalities, and aspirations of its original owners, the house of Robin and Patricia Boyd and their family was intended to inspire, to be enjoyed, and to provoke discussion of alternatives and better, more appropriate ways of doing things. Interestingly, after an international survey of other architecturally significant houses held in the public domain, it was another Boyd house, the Manning and Dymphna Clark house (1952) in Canberra, home of the Manning Clark Foundation, which served as the most applicable precedent for the Foundation’s operation of ‘Walsh Street’.

‘Walsh Street’ had never been opened to the public prior to 2005, and the Foundation was keen to maximise the potential of the considerable public interest in visiting and viewing the house to promote its mission of encouraging a greater understanding of the benefits of good design, as well as using the house to achieve a sustainable financial outcome. The house is used regularly by the Foundation for public meetings, seminars, lectures, and film screenings. One example, ‘Melbourne Design Masters’, is a series of public seminars held at the house on a monthly basis during winter. These seminars provide the public an opportunity to visit ‘Walsh Street’ and to hear from people who have had a significant influence on the design of Melbourne. Every one of these events has been fully subscribed.

Melbourne University, one of the founding supporters of the foundation, have used the house on many occasions for student workshops, lectures, and presentations, as well as a meeting facility and a venue for fundraising. Other Foundation members and supporters have hosted dinners for clients, and held staff functions, workshops, and planning days at the house. In addition to retaining its original furniture, the house also contains a significant collection of Robin Boyd’s original manuscripts, magazines, newspaper cuttings, and books which have been retained and cared for by Mrs. Davies and the Boyd Family at ‘Walsh Street’ since the time of Boyd’s death. Where appropriate, these have been retained in situ and support the Foundation’s research and publication activities, including a new fiftieth anniversary edition of *The Australian Ugliness*, published in 2010.

The most successful of the Robin Boyd Foundation’s major public programmes, both financially and in terms of achieving its objective to continue Boyd’s work of raising public awareness about the everyday benefits of good design, has been the series of public open days on which privately owned buildings are opened to the general public. While also featuring buildings by other architects, the experience of these open days has engendered among the owners of Boyd houses a sense of their homes as part of a wider collection of built artefacts which they are assisting to curate. The open days not only bring the experience of these dwellings to a wider audience but foster debate and interpretation of the Boyd legacy and assist its conservation. It is the income and public awareness generated by this programme which allows the Robin Boyd Foundation to maintain the ‘Walsh Street’ house and retain it in the public domain. The Foundation is currently looking at introducing a ‘New Homes Service’, an initiative similar to Boyd’s ‘Small Homes Service’ that would promote good design in general housing and make well designed housing available at an affordable price, as well as establishing an income stream to help support and maintain the ‘Walsh Street’ house.

**Conclusions**

This paper has argued that, when seeking to conserve and engage with significant elements of cultural heritage that also form part of the functional built environment, there is great value in finding ways to engage buildings within their contemporary environment and urban culture. Furthermore, when the contemporary use of built heritage can be aligned with the values and social purpose of the organisations or institutions who steward them, this not only assists a building’s conservation, but can keep its cultural legacy alive, enabling ongoing relevance and contributing to cultural richness.

The Greening Government House project, while it was very much concerned with the building’s resource use and energy consumption, considered these issues in relation to the building’s occupancy – a key aspect of its cultural significance – and the role of the complex within the sensitive ecology of the Gardens precinct. The environmental upgrade therefore became an opportunity to broaden the sustainability agenda to enhance both heritage and sustainability outcomes. As the project is progressively implemented, this will help to ensure that the building stock continues to be used in an optimal, sustainable manner that is fit for purpose and relevant to current and future vice regal occupants.
‘Walsh Street’ can be seen as a tangible representation of the design values of Robin Boyd: innovation, appropriateness and responsiveness. By seeking to adopt and promote these values in its own activities, the Robin Boyd Foundation has been able to ensure the future of this valuable cultural artefact, which, not having been a public or community asset, was at risk in the private housing market. Conserving the house by bringing it into public and community stewardship required a creative approach where sustaining the cultural legacy it represents became the key to ensuring that its conservation is sustainable.

References
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State of Victoria. 2006, Victoria’s heritage: strengthening our communities, Department of Sustainability and Environment, Victoria.

Endnotes
1 Victoria’s Heritage Strategy, Direction 2: Using our heritage for a sustainable future, aims to ‘create new life and a sustainable future for well-loved places and objects’ through promoting conservation and supporting adaptive re-use.
2 This development came after decades in which public policy in this complex sphere struggled to reconcile an emphasis on spatial planning and the management of urban systems with the social, environmental and economic effects of particular development paths.
3 Findings from the Greening Government House study influenced the design of a research project commissioned by Heritage Council of Victoria, and conducted by RMIT University, to investigate embodied energy and heritage buildings.
4 Much of the information for this case study was sourced from interviews with Tony Lee, Executive Director of the Robin Boyd Foundation.
5 In addition to Walsh Street and the Lloyd house, several other houses by Boyd, as well as significant houses by other local modernists, have come up for sale during the first decade of the twenty-first century as the original owners who had commissioned them have reached the end of their period of habitation in these dwellings.